

Hard worker has loved each minute of a life on the land

INTERVIEW

Margaret Aldam has worked on the same Yorkshire farm for 65 years. She has endured freezing winters and seen farming methods change. She talks to **Chris Bond**.

MARGARET Aldam insists on making the teas and coffees for everyone, even though she's the person being honoured.

The pensioner has worked at Pasture Farm, part of the Co-operative Farms estate at Swinefleet, near Goole, for 65 years and this week she received a long service award in recognition of all her hard work.

Her working life on the farm spans eight decades during which time she has thrown herself into practically every aspect of farm life, from toiling in the fold yards and fields to latterly helping keep the offices clean, and she has witnessed the mechanisation of farming with her own eyes.

As a sprightly 78 year-old, Margaret is a great advert for working outdoors. But not only has she spent her whole working life on the farm, she was raised there too. Her grandfather was the foreman on one of six farms that made up the old Ousefleet Hall Estate, bought by the Co-op between the two world wars, and when she was born in 1932 she stayed with her grandparents.

"My grandma asked my mum if she would leave me with her. My mum and dad used to come and see me every weekend and as I got older I used to go and see them at their home near Selby for my holidays, but I stayed with my grandparents and I've been

on the Co-op farm since I was six months old," she says, smiling happily.

Her childhood was idyllic, surrounded by all kinds of animals and living in a bustling farm house. As a youngster she remembers the drone of German

bombers flying overhead during the war. "There was one time when gran was up at five o'clock cooking breakfast and she spotted a parachute landing in a field in the distance and she ran upstairs to get my grandad. He got a few of the men together but they never found anyone, just the parachute, which we used to make shirts and blouses. I still have a piece of that parachute," she says.

In 1946, Margaret left school having set her heart on working at the farm. "I was good at school and my grandfather wanted me to be a school teacher but all I wanted to do was work on the land, I loved being out in the fresh air, and when the time came for me to go away to college I just wouldn't go." Her grandfather gave her all the worst jobs in the hope that it might put her off, but it didn't work. "He would tell me to go and muck the pigs out and all sorts of hard jobs but I just loved it."

In the early days, the farm grew potatoes, sugar beets, wheat, hay and barley and Margaret

worked as a farm hand. She hoed and hauled with a pair of Clydesdales as well as anyone. "I did harvesting and hay making, everything and anything that needed doing." Some of her fondest memories come from working with the horses. "I would drive a horse and cart during potato time and the women would fill it with potatoes and then I'd empty it." Rationing continued for several years after the war finished. "Our groceries used to come on a horse and cart from Swinefleet once a fortnight,

we used to get flour in a huge bag and salt came in a big block about so high," she says, making a brick-sized shape with her hands.

In those days there were more than 20 men and women working on the farm, starting at eight in the morning and finishing at four in the afternoon each day. She says the camaraderie was "wonderful" but this doesn't hide the fact that conditions could be tough. "I remember times we'd be outside riddling potatoes when it was snowing. It was bitterly cold, we used to be stood at the riddle with a hessian bag full of straw on our feet with another couple of hessian bags to make a hood that you tied

together with a band to try and keep and warm. I used to go home at dinner time and gran

would have a hot water bottle filled and I would sit and have my dinner with my feet on it because they were that cold.”

When she was 17 the first tractor arrived on the farm on a wartime lease agreement with the US. Some of the older men viewed it as a threat to their livelihoods but, as ever, Margaret was a willing driver. “It was a three-wheeler with a hand clutch and I thought it was great, but I would have a go at anything and I still would today.”

In 1954 she married and after a two-day honeymoon returned to work. Two years later she had a son, but by the mid-60s with farming becoming increasingly mechanised she took a job looking after the offices. “As the number of tractors grew there wasn’t as much land work for ladies, not full time, and I felt I was ready for a change.”

She believes attitudes to farming have changed over the years. “There’s not the same feeling among the people, it’s just a job to most of them now whereas when I was young we took pride in everything we did. Everything now is so mechanical and we’re down to four men whereas at one time there would be 12 or more on this farm. But they don’t need the same manpower.”

As someone who has spent almost her entire life on a farm she is concerned that future generations won’t share her passion. “Young people today don’t now anything at all about farming. Some of the kiddies don’t know where milk comes from they think it just comes out of a bottle, and it’s the same with potatoes, they don’t know where they come from.”

Margaret continues to work part-time during the week although late last year she fell ill after suffering from blurred vision. She went for an eye test not suspecting that anything was seriously wrong, but after being referred to a specialist she had an MRI scan at Hull Royal Infirmary which revealed a brain tumour. “The doctor showed me the scan and the tumour was the size of

a lemon. I couldn’t believe it because I didn’t feel poorly at all.”

She had an operation to remove the tumour early in January which proved successful and astonishingly she was back at work just five weeks later. Today, Margaret is doing well. “I feel I’ve been very lucky,” she says. “I can honestly say I have loved every minute of working here on the farm, it’s been brilliant and I would do it all again.”

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MARGARET’S LIFE STORY

MARGARET Aldam was born in 1932. She grew up on a Co-operative farm near Goole, in East Yorkshire, with her grandparents who worked there.

She left school at the age of 14 and started working on the farm where she did everything from hay making and hoeing, to driving a horse and cart and fattening the cattle.

Margaret later worked in the farm offices when the land work started to dry up as mechanisation took over from manpower.

Now 78 years old, Margaret received a long service award this week from Christine Tacon, managing director of the Co-operative Farms, in recognition of 65 years spent working on the farm.



THEN AND NOW: Margaret takes the controls of a very different John Deere, the farm’s first tractor, in 1949.



CHANGING TIMES: Margaret Aldam with a modern John Deere tractor on the farm near Goole where she has worked since 1946, a time before mechanisation.

PICTURE: MIKE COWLING